



Saint Helens-North Cascades elk relocation

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In an effort to augment the dwindling North Cascades elk herd, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and Point Elliott treaty tribes are proposing to move approximately 100 elk from the Mount St. Helens Wildlife Area in southwest Washington to sites near the South Fork of the Nooksack River in northern Skagit and southern Whatcom counties. Preliminary plans call for moving about 40 to 50 animals in 2003, and a similar number in 2004. The animals will be radio-collared at time of capture and monitored after their release.

Why is elk relocation proposed?

Wildlife managers believe the elk transfer will accelerate efforts to increase the size of the North Cascades elk herd. The relocation will remove a small number of elk from the Mount St. Helens Wildlife Area, where winter mortalities from starvation have been higher than expected in recent years. The North Cascades herd has declined markedly and augmentation is one of several measures aimed at restoring the elk resource in the area. Computer-generated herd population models indicate augmenting the herd with animals relocated from other areas will speed the process of rebuilding the herd.

What is the status and future plan for the North Cascades elk herd?

Like the state's nine other herds, North Cascades elk herd is managed under an individual herd plan, which was developed with public input. The North Cascades elk herd plan, developed under the overall WDFW game management framework, calls for a number of actions, including herd augmentation, to increase the elk population.

Elk already in the Nooksack area have been monitored closely by biologists, who have placed radio collars on cow elk there, and work with volunteers to recapture the animals twice yearly for health checks. Based on these checks, biologists have determined that North Cascades elk are generally healthy and do not suffer from malnutrition.

However, overall numbers of North Cascades elk have declined from more than 1,700 animals in 1984 to fewer than 300 animals currently. The population objective for

the herd is 1,450 animals.

What will be done to monitor the transferred elk?

Relocated adult cow elk will be marked with ear tags and fitted with radio collars that emit a signal that wildlife biologists can monitor to determine each animal's location. Under preliminary plans, calves will not be marked, to reduce handling time and resulting stress on the animals.

How will agricultural lands be protected?

The elk transfer is planned for a season and location aimed at encouraging the relocated elk to remain in wild habitat away from agricultural land. A variety of management tools, such as hazing, crop fencing and leasing grazing lands, may be used if elk begin to move to agricultural areas. If relocated animals stray onto agricultural land and cause persistent agricultural damage, they will be lethally removed.

What are the benefits of elk relocation?

The relocation project is aimed at jump-starting efforts to increase the number of North Cascades elk. Wildlife biologists estimate that supplementing the herd with relocated animals could bring the population back to harvestable levels in seven to 10 years, as opposed to the 20 or more years that would be required without augmentation.

Has elk relocation been conducted previously?

Yes. Elk relocation has been undertaken in recent years to address damage situations and other special herd management considerations. WDFW has directed or participated in nearly a half-dozen elk relocation projects in the last decade.

Can habitat in the Nooksack area support more elk?

WDFW, tribes and other partners have spent the past five years evaluating habitat in the Nooksack area and its ability to support additional elk. Based on that evaluation, wildlife biologists believe that existing elk are in good and there is adequate habitat to support additional relocated elk. While relocated elk may wander, the timing and location of this transfer should minimize animal movement.

In the past decade, a half-dozen habitat enhancement projects have been undertaken in the North Cascade elk herd area. The projects typically included seeding and fertilization projects to encourage grasses and forbs for elk forage. More than 100 acres of elk habitat have been improved through these enhancement projects, at a cost of more than \$55,000. Project participants have included WDFW, Point Elliott treaty tribes, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the U.S. Forest Service, the state Department of Natural Resources, Crown Pacific and other timber companies.

In addition, road management efforts have been undertaken with landowners in the area to improve the quality and availability of elk habitat.

What will the relocation cost, and how will it be funded?

The relocation is expected to cost approximately \$50,000 with WDFW and a coalition of Point Elliott treaty tribes sharing the expense.

Why are Mount St. Helens elk being chosen for the relocation?

At present, the portion of the Mount St. Helens herd that populates the Toutle River Valley is at or possibly exceeds the carrying capacity of its winter range—the ability of the habitat to support the number of animals present. This number of animals wintering on the wildlife area can exceed forage during significant winter storms or periods when deep snow is present for extended periods at higher elevations. In addition, summer range conditions may be such that elk enter the winter without sufficient fat reserves. During severe winters, elk numbers in some low-elevation areas along the Toutle River sometimes increase to the point where winter range forage is inadequate. In moderate winters some older elk and a few young animals have perished from winter stress. While some annual winter mortality occurs naturally, in recent years winter elk mortality has been higher than expected. Several years ago 79 animals died in a particularly harsh winter, and this past winter's toll has been estimated at more than a dozen animals.

How would the elk be moved?

Preliminary plans call for capturing the elk in small groups in a temporary trap, consisting of an open corral with extended wing fencing. A chartered helicopter would be used to fly over small groups of elk to drive them toward the corral opening. The primary focus will be on relocating cows and their social groups, as they represent the greatest potential for increasing the Nooksack population. For this reason, and for safety concerns, no mature bulls will be moved. Once in the corral, elk to be relocated will enter a chute, where they would be individually checked by wildlife veterinarians, and fitted with identifying ear tags and radio transmitter collars. Finally, the animals would be moved into horse trailers for transport to release sites along the South Fork of the Nooksack River.

Is there a risk to the elk?

Relocation poses some safety risk for both for the animals and the people handling them. Although the vast majority of elk survive relocation, a small percentage of animals typically die from stress during the capture or after release. The proposed relocation has been planned with the welfare of the animals in mind. Wildlife biologists experienced in earlier relocations will plan and conduct the relocation with the aim of minimizing stress on the animals.

Are there disease risks to the Nooksack elk?

Wildlife biologists have not detected any disease problems in the elk on the Mount St. Helens Wildlife Area. As a precaution, the transferred elk will be tested for parasites and disease at the time of capture.

Will moving elk adversely affect the Mount Saint Helens elk herd?

There should be little short-term and no long-term impact to the Mount Saint Helens herd. The number of animals proposed for transfer is small compared to the total population of elk in the Mount St. Helens area. There may be some temporary reduction of numbers on the St. Helens Wildlife Area, which will provide better conditions for wintering elk that move into the area from higher elevations during severe winters.

Will the transferred elk be hunted?

Elk hunting is closed in the Nooksack release area, except for control of agricultural damage. The WDFW North Cascades elk herd management plan sets strict guidelines for when hunting could occur. The overall herd must meet certain thresholds before hunting would be allowed in the future.

Who is responsible for the elk after transfer?

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, as manager of Washington's wildlife, is responsible for the elk after transfer. However, this is a cooperative program and both WDFW and the tribes will be part of the management of the elk after the release. Both WDFW and tribal staff will be part of the monitoring program.

What other groups or organizations are involved in the transfer?

WDFW, Point Elliott treaty tribes and volunteers, including members of the Mount St. Helens Preservation Society, will participate in the transfer planning process. During the actual transfer additional volunteer organizations, including the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, will be encouraged to participate.